

US relations with China, Japan, the Philippines and the Pacific Islands

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States became interested in expanding its territory and influence in the Far East. The US treasury secretary said in 1848, after the USA's expansion to the Pacific Coast: 'Asia has suddenly become our neighbour with a placid intervening ocean inviting our steamships upon the track of commerce greater than all Europe combined.' The United States was anxious to develop the vast potential of the Chinese and Japanese markets. The British and the Dutch were already established in China and the East Indies by the 1840s, and making large profits. The Americans hoped to follow suit. By the early 20th century, the USA had acquired a large colony in the Philippines, strategic outposts in Hawaii and Midway Island (see page 97) and substantial commerce throughout the Far East.

WHY DID THE U.S. BECOME INTERESTED IN ASIA?

The United States and China

The USA was well aware of the potential size of the Chinese market and the profits that could be made there. The British had forced open Chinese trade – at gunpoint – in the early 19th century (when the Chinese refused to trade, the British just bombarded their ports until they did). The Chinese were reluctant to permit foreigners to sell goods in their country, particularly as one of the main British products was opium (a highly addictive drug).

In 1844, under pressure from US merchants who were concerned that the British were going to dominate the Chinese market, the United States signed the Treaty of Wangxia with the Chinese government. This treaty allowed Americans to trade in China on the same terms as the British, known as the 'most favoured nation' policy. The treaty was supposed to be revised after 12 years, but China's intense dislike of foreigners meant that it continually avoided renewing the treaty. When the French and the British used force to persuade the Chinese to open their country fully to trade, the Americans did not join in, but were allowed to trade there under the terms of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858.

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This treaty opened all of China to US trade, allowed American Christian missionaries to come to China, and also allowed an American embassy in Peking (modern-day Beijing). China was now open for US business. The Treaty of Tianjin was renewed in the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, with the United States retaining its 'most favoured nation' status. This was what the Americans wanted, referring to it as an Open Door policy. Chinese immigration to the United States started, providing a large labour force for building the railways. Fears over a potential flood of immigrants, nicknamed the 'Yellow Peril' by the American press, led to restrictions in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Open Door policy ✱
A policy that gives multiple powers economic and trading access to a particular country, with an emphasis on free trade.

* **sphere of influence**
An area where one country has dominant commercial, cultural, economic, political and/or military influence.

Unlike other countries, such as Britain, Russia, Germany and above all Japan, the USA never wanted to colonise or settle in China. Its main interest was in trade. After Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, the USA did not join with Russia, France and Germany to stop Japan taking over large parts of China. Nor did the United States gain a **sphere of influence** like Britain and Germany in the gradual break-up of China in the 1890s.

In 1900, an uprising known as the **Boxer Rebellion**, directed largely against foreigners, broke out in China. The USA sent a small number of troops to assist other countries in the rescue of the foreign embassies in Peking. Military intervention was considered necessary by the USA to ensure that commerce still flowed.

In 1911, the growing demand for radical change in China culminated in revolution. Foreign influences had disrupted the country's traditional ways, and economic change had led to demands for social and political change. The death of the 73-year-old empress, followed by the accession to the throne of a three-year-old emperor, sparked the revolution. Radical and reform-minded élites, often educated abroad and in Japan in particular, led to a radical, republican and comparatively peaceful revolt in 1911. The child emperor abdicated, and China became a republic on 1 January 1912.

Woodrow Wilson was anxious to prevent the exploitation of China: he broke up a US conglomerate that threatened the country's independence, did his best to stop Japanese aggression there in 1915, and made Japan return Shantung Province to China in the 1919 post-First World War peace settlements. The USA never made enormous profits from its trade with China, but still wished to preserve the territorial integrity of the country against its aggressive neighbours.

The United States and Japan

Japan, like China, became a target for US commerce in the early 19th century. However, it was even more determinedly isolationist. By the 1840s, American commercial interests started to put pressure on both Japan and the US government to open Japan to US trade. The Dutch had already gained access to the Japanese market and the Americans wanted a share. Another factor that encouraged the Americans to persist was that US whalers and those who traded with China wanted accessible ports for food and shelter en route to China.

The settlement of Oregon (see page 74) and the acquisition of California opened up the USA's Pacific Coast and led to a greater interest in the Far East. The first 'official' visit to Japan by a US warship, the USS *Preble*, was made in 1849. The ship was there to rescue US sailors who had been shipwrecked in Japan. The Japanese were reluctant to let the *Preble* into port, but after the threat of force it successfully retrieved the sailors.